

## Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping



# Meditations On a Monastic Garden

A garden can play many roles in our lives, depending on its design and intent: a treat for the senses, a source of sustenance, or a simple place to mess about with plants. But certainly one of the most important and traditional roles is as a unique place away from the world and worldly concerns. This special sort of garden can serve as an area for reflection, meditation, and spiritual healing. Indeed, for many of us, while we acknowledge having lost Eden, we haven't given up on trying to recreate an ideal space for body and soul.

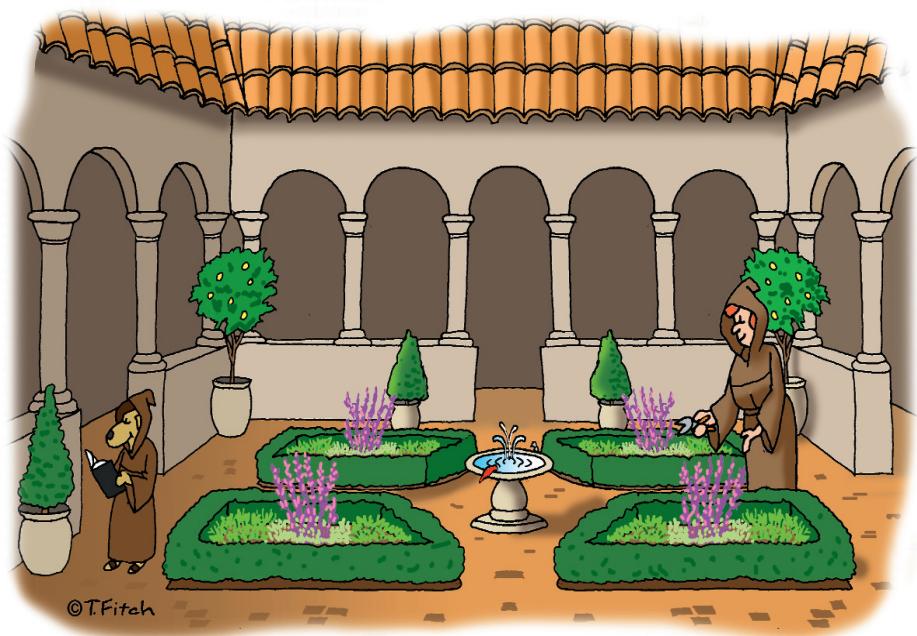
Perhaps no finer model for this meditation garden exists than the great monastic gardens which flourished for more than a millennium. By their very nature, these cloistered gardens were physically separated from the outside world by walls and roofed arcades, allowing visitors to focus within: both on the inner features of this peaceful garden, with its tranquil fountain, fruit trees, and healing herbs — and, more importantly, within themselves.

In fact, the very act of enclosing a garden reflects an almost primal understanding of what a garden is. For fun with philol-

ogy, we can look to the etymology of "garden" and find the proto Indo-European root word "ghor-dho," which means "enclosure." (That word is also related to "yard" and the Latin *hortus*, as in horticulture.) Perhaps more interesting, medieval cloistered gardens were often called paradise gardens, harkening back to Eden, with the word "paradise" coming to the West as *pairidaeza*, from the Old Persian, also meaning "walled enclosure." The West, after all, did not have a monopoly on enclosed gardens.

To create a true garden meant separating your plants — and your person — from the world outside. And as our world is no more peaceful than that of the abbots who created the Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries, perhaps we might just want to return to the notion of a cloistered garden of our own.

Naturally, your three bedroom colonial might not easily lend itself to the addition of a finely cut stone-walled quadrangle, but you can at least separate your meditative space from the



rest of your landscape with a simple wooden fence, trellises, arbors, or a planting of shrubs. You're simply looking for a private space where you can turn within.

Following the lead of the monastic gardens, which typically observed a formal layout of rectangular beds and pathways, you might want to establish raised beds, another common medieval feature, in which to cultivate herbs and vegetables. After all, St. Benedict in the 6th century required that his monks provide all their own "necessaries" within the walls of their monastery, much like the Victory Gardens of the 1940s.

Herbs were especially important to the monastic garden, as any fan of the Brother Cadfael mysteries knows. Medicinal plants were at the heart of monastic life, where monks studied and recorded the therapeutic properties of roots, dried leaves, and fruits, thereby institutionalizing modern pharmacology, much as the abbeys laid the groundwork for hospitals. Consider a quick visit to a public herb garden to identify medicinal and other herbs for your garden. You will be surprised that key medieval herbs are still favorites today.

Fruit trees, another symbol of paradise (munching on which led to man's expulsion), were common features in almost all

medieval gardens, and might adorn your garden, as well. Of course, barring the presence of a serpent, you should feel free to enjoy any of the apples or plums that you grow.

And while planning your bit of backyard paradise, remember that fragrance can stir memory and reflection, much as incense is used in both Eastern and Western religious traditions. Depending on your taste, you might plant soft musky-scented English boxwoods as a formal edge to your pathways, or choose from the palette of native shrubs and vines such as buttonbush or arbor-loving virgin's bower.

The center of your garden should host a single, strong element, whether a trickling fountain, birdbath, or piece of sculpture. Original medieval works are probably out of the question, but concrete knock-offs of the Irish St. Fiacre (patron saint of gardeners) can be found in various garden shops, especially those associated with cathedrals, naturally.

Lastly, remember to set aside an area where you can actually sit and enjoy - and use - your meditation garden. That means setting aside time as well. The world goes along in its bumpy chaotic way, but you can still find a peaceful retreat and solace for your soul in paradise, even if it's only in your backyard.

## A note on cloistered gardens

I strongly believe that at one time or other, nearly everyone has been profoundly influenced by a special place or an experience of place. For a young kid from Brooklyn, that place was the Cloisters in New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's world-renowned and truly staggering collection of medieval art.

The Cloisters is a museum woven around five actual monastic gardens disassembled and reassembled stone-by-stone in Ft. Tryon Park, overlooking the Hudson River. At around age 12, I experienced the Cloisters for the first time with my father one late winter's day. I remember the scent of lemon and orange blossoms from potted trees dotting the glass-screened arcades; the burbling sound of fountains competing with Gregorian chant echoing through the complex.

That single visit ultimately led to my education in medieval studies, my vocation as a horticulturist, and created a cultural passion that informs each and every moment of my life. Today, my wife (a medievalist) and I are on the verge of planning the construction of my dream home: it will have bedrooms, a kitchen, library, and all the rest - and it will be built around a central courtyard, a garden, with herbs and fruit trees and fountains.

Evidently some places change you forever.



**The GreenMan Show** is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be

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